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## The Relationship of Avant Garde and Radical Political Cinema in the United States

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Editorial note: This paper was originally prepared for a special issue of the new French publication CinemAction (April, 1980, edited by Raphaël Bassan and Guy Hennebelle) on the international film avant garde. Subsequently we have circulated that version to a good number of people and received many helpful comments and challenging criticisms. While we are convinced of the soundness of our position, we are also aware of the need for further research, analysis, and explanation of some of our judgements. This present version does not incorporate all the changes we plan to make before publication in English.

The preconditions for a close relationship between the artistic avant garde and militant political activity include the development of a strong and autonomous experimental film movement and the emergence of new political forces in the U.S. Significantly, the first of these preconditions, the growth of the New American Cinema in the 50's and early 60's, took place in the context of the Cold War, the suppression of domestic dissent, and the bland mediocrity of Eisenhower America. In this context, its aesthetic rebelliousness was a mild form of political dissent, though heavily inflected with the political limitations of its time. However the emergence in the 60's of new patterns of militancy--the Black movement, the anti-war movement, the women's liberation movement--and the revival of an active (though still small and divided) Marxist left opened new possibilities for unity between political militants and experimental filmmakers.

In June, 1979, 400 film and video activists gathered at the Alternative Cinema

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Conference.<sup>1</sup> The leading role in progressive cinema assumed by Black, Hispanic, Asian, feminist and gay filmmakers at the close of 70's was made particularly apparent when the long-unchallenged primacy of the Boys of '68 (the privileged, overwhelmingly white, heterosexual male world of radical political filmmaking) was challenged. For many participants in that conference the message was clear: we are entering a new decade.

Most political filmmakers who see their own community or political movement as their primary allegiance are forced, fairly early on, into dealing with the question of how to communicate most effectively. This question has many phrasings, all quite relevant to this article. What is the relation of avant garde political content and avant garde aesthetic form? How can new forms be developed for an audience educated by the mass media? Are avant garde strategies as appropriate for the audience as for the filmmaker? Is it reasonable to be anti-narrative when your people's stories are still untold? How can films include both emotion and political analysis? How can one remain an engaged participant as a filmmaker, instead of becoming part of a rewarded elite? Is it possible to fit both the avant garde and the militant into one movie?

Increasingly experience is forcing a rephrasing of this last question. New film forms will succeed in a political sense only to the extent that they are connected to political realities and audience experience, and only insofar as they have their goal in a sphere beyond the merely aesthetic. The cherished notion of radical form alone as inherently progressive is an intellectual self-deception and luxury whose time has passed. It is time for the filmmaker to give up the heroic pose of a Hercules rent asunder by the different demands of art and politics. New art forms must be developed out of the ideological struggle, out of the resistance to the dominant culture, and fit the requirements of that fight. We are just beginning to see the imaginative and effective films that meet the needs of today's political movements in the U.S.

In this essay we are trying to identify an emerging trend in filmmaking practice and in critical

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practice. We are trying to point out where it came from and the general situation it finds itself in. However we cannot know how it will develop. By looking at the conditions and events which have brought independent film to its present condition we are writing film history. To write film history is to establish a canon of those works most worth thinking about, paying critical attention to. In so doing we are self-consciously opposing a specific critical orthodoxy which is embodied in Anthology Film Archives and related activities. At the same time we've become increasingly aware of the need for new historical research: the history of Canyon Cinema Coop remains to be written, for example, and the Legend of Maya Deren Project is just beginning to give all of us a full understanding of that crucial figure. Similarly, the relevance of Oscar Micheaux and the independent Black film production/exhibition network in which he worked has yet to be evaluated in terms of current needs and directions. We are also acutely aware of the fact that every history, every selection from the past, involves aesthetic and political principles. The basis for our selection, for our history, has two distinct components. First, we are arguing for a wider definition of "political" that recognizes the emergence of new forces in America. Second, because we are dealing with a still evolving phenomenon, we are discussing films which we think often show deep contradictions and which have distinct limits. Our stress, inevitably, is on the most progressive aspects of such films. We are also arguing for an expanded definition of the avant garde in film (and we will use the terms avant garde, experimental, underground, and independent as casually interchangeable). Against those who see the avant garde as exclusive to the professional art world, we stand for a broader understanding that recognizes additional and diverse audiences.

### Cold War Aesthetics and Politics in the New American Cinema

The evolution of the New American Cinema in the 50's and 60's offers an instructive record of the relationship between avant garde and political independent filmmaking during a crucial historical period. Particularly now that 20 years have clarified the positions of then-evolving participants, the

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course of shifting alliances and alienated affections reveals a clear ideological pattern. New York's Cinema 16 (founded by Amos Vogel as a showcase and forum for independent film in 1947, the same year that San Francisco's similar Art in Cinema began) organized in 1953 a symposium on "Poetry and the Film" that offered the first real public debate on the theory behind what was then considered experimental film. Significantly, this first record of the avant garde film project is an aesthetic statement which addresses itself to political concerns largely in terms of stating its antagonistic relation to the Hollywood money men. The symposium centered on Maya Deren's presentation of the "horizontal" (i.e., dramatic, narrative) elements of cinema in relation to its "vertical" (i.e., poetic, nonfunctional) potential, using as an explanatory example the value of the soliloquies in Shakespeare's plays, prized for their poetry although they often seem tangential to the plays' dramatic development or conclusion. Deren was a notable figure in the avant garde at this time, not only for her films, but for her ceaseless prosletizing. Determined to close the gap between the avant garde filmmaker and the public, and taking audience ignorance as cause for communication, not condemnation, she continually explicated her work and aims. Similarly democratic impulses inspired Jonas Mekas and Vogel to build an institutional base for independent filmmaking: distribution and exhibition (Cinema 16), and criticism (Film Culture). This base helped to break down the isolation of the individual artist, to validate a cultural <sup>†</sup>alternative to the dominant commercial cinema, to foster the imagining of other possibilities, and to provide the communication and resources that would allow a new cinema to come into being. Both Mekas and Vogel were eclectic in their taste and generous in their support. Vogel has to this day held to the position that "in the last analysis, every work of art, to the extent that it is original and breaks with the past instead of repeating it, is subversive."<sup>3</sup> The implicit limits of this position were pointed out later by critic Parker Tyler (also a symposium participant). Tracing the relationship of Beat culture to the anti-establishment thinking of underground filmmakers, his 1969 comment has the clarity of hindsight:

Curiously enough, the Underground Film movement, ... can be identified as

having traits of both Anarchist and Communist philosophy. The catch is that...the

movement has taken specifically formal virtues as the object of

destruction, and has done so not autocratically, by rigidly excluding those virtues,

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but by using its universal-tolerance code.

The development of this universal tolerance code could be seen in 1960 when a different meeting took place. The convening of the New American Cinema Group, an uneasy alliance of the political and the poetic, produced a founding statement with anti-capitalist tendencies. The 25 member 'group called for new methods of financing independent films, praised personal expression, condemned censorship, placed itself in opposition to the current distribution-exhibition policies which it thought high time to "blow up," and mandated Emile de Antonio to set up a distribution cooperative. A new stage had been reached in the New American Cinema. The eclectic spirit succeeded in opening up the ranks of the avant garde to a broad range of cinematic strategies, as the first four Film Culture annual awards confirm. They were given to low-budget fictional narration like SHADOWS (John Cassavetes) in 1959, to the wacky off-Beat PULL MY DAISY (Alfred Leslie and Robert Frank), in 1960, the cinema-verite approach of PRIMARY (Richard Leacock, Donn Pennebaker, Robert Drew and Albert Maysles) in 1961, and the poetic cinema of Stan Brakhage's THE DEAD and PRELUDE in 1962. The parameters of the New American Cinema had expanded, both politically and aesthetically, but had done so very much along its earlier lines of definition: against the domination of the film industry, they stood for artisan production. Attitudes suited to Eisenhower's Cold War were slightly updated to the optimistic liberalism of the Kennedy Years.

The positions assumed by Jonas Mekas during this period provide a representative index of the times. In the 50's Mekas had continued the politics of the heart which he used in the Resistance <sup>against</sup> to Nazi troops in his native Lithuania during World War 2. His early New York diary films chronicle his pacifist participation in Ban the Bomb demonstrations. By 1964, he had made THE BRIG, his <sup>documentary</sup> style filming of the Living Theatre's production of Kenneth Brown's play about military brutality. There was always a strong current of romanticism motivating such anti-establishment politics (in the U.S. a line stretching from Henry David Thoreau to Timothy Leary). For Mekas, as for many artists, this <sup>tendency</sup> easily metamorphosed into a creed of cultivating one's own garden, an individualism implicit all along in the Age of Aquarius. Indeed, by 1966 Mekas could write,

We used to march with posters protesting this and protesting that.  
Today, we realize that to improve the world, the others, first we  
have to improve ourselves; that only through the beauty of  
our own selves can we beautify the others.<sup>4A</sup>

This evolution along the lines of individualistic tolerance can also be traced in terms of Mekas' position on homosexuality. In 1955 Mekas wrote a controversial essay on U.S. experimental film (since repudiated by the author) that centered its attack on the "adolescent character" of the films and the "conspiracy of homosexuality" among their makers. In retrospect, Mekas was rather on-target in his assessment of those films' heroes: "touch with reality seems to be very feeble. Instead of a human being, we find a poetic version of a modern zombie."<sup>5</sup> Mekas faulted these films' symbolist/surrealist unreality, the characters' Dostoevskian <sup>inner</sup> absorption, the entire work's distance from the concrete world in which people live. In other words, Mekas criticized <sup>cized</sup> one dominant



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On the one hand the stepping up of anti-war activity<sup>and the emergence of a militant Black Power movement</sup> would lead to a new engaged cinema, and on the other hand, the experimental cinema<sup>moved closer to</sup> to modernist visual arts for its models<sup>ing</sup> lead<sup>ing</sup> to a new structural cinema.

In 1967 the Pentagon demonstration marked the end of nonviolence as the leading tactic in the anti-war movement and brought together a new<sup>group</sup> of committed documentarists, who then formed Newsreel, the new left filmmaking and distribution-exhibition group that flourished in New York and other cities for several years. Seeing themselves basically in an agitational and informational role, they were open to and influenced by<sup>such as the work of</sup> fresh strategies of Cuba's Santiago Alvarez. <sup>and many other Third World radical filmmakers,</sup> As with Alvarez, the combination of limited resources, political enthusiasm, desire to communicate about topical issues, and eager audiences led to films still notable for their vigor, immediacy, and fresh vision. In addition, <sup>a</sup> heavily Yippie influence<sup>in</sup> the early months of Newsreel made it open to a wide variety of artistic experimentation--an impulse reinforced by the accomplished editing style of Allan Siegel. It was a time when almost every news report mentioned new fighting in Vietnam, and new resistance at home--ghetto rebellions, farm worker's unionizing, draft resistance, student activism, and many expressions of change. It was <sup>appeared</sup> a time when rock music<sup>a</sup> progressive, and the counter-culture seemed to make everyone under 30 political.

As Newsreel responded to events "in the streets," the avant garde responded to events "in the galleries." Annette Michelson sets the terms of this new position in "Film and the Radical Aspiration" (1966), which began<sup>a</sup> pessimistically:

The history of Cinema is, like that of Revolution in our time, a chronicle of hopes and expectations, aroused and suspended, tested and deceived.<sup>7</sup>

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Michelson

consistent<sup>ly</sup>

perceived  
radical

formalism as the only possible political and aesthetic stance for filmmakers. Indeed, in summing up the status quo later in the article she wrote:

In a country whose power and affluence are maintained by the dialectic of a war economy, in a country whose dream of revolution has been sublimated in reformism and frustrated by an equivocal prosperity, cinematic radicalism is condemned to a politics and strategy of social and aesthetic subversion.<sup>8</sup>

Thus independent film turns from the material processes of life to the materiality of cinema, film's investigation of its own filmic properties (grain, strobe effect, focus, etc.).

Andy Warhol --- a successful Pop Art painter and celebrity

marked a turning point

turned filmmaker--<sup>minimalist</sup> when he received the 1964 Film Culture award for his

<sup>filmic</sup> films SLEEP, KISS, EAT, HAIRCUT, and EMPIRE. While Warhol's early work parallels the tradition of breaking taboos, his recognition by Film Culture is for a new phase of

his work which can be seen to usher in a new style of filmmaking derived less from

Pop and mass art and more from the minimalist phase beginning to be heralded

by critics and avant garde galleries. The post-modernist canons of the art world at this

time (with emphasis on process art, minimalism, performance, and conceptual art) exercised

a powerful influence on this generation of filmmakers: for example, Tony Conrad, THE

FLICKER, 1966, Michael Snow, WAVELENGTH, 1967; Ken Jacobs, TOM, TOM, THE

PIPER'S SON, 1969.



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## The Seventies Orthodoxy

In 1970, Gene Youngblood's book, Expanded Cinema <sup>promised</sup> an Aquarian democratization of the media, expanding from the West Coast to topple the exclusive media hierarchies nationwide with not just new forms, but whole new technologies: video, computers, generational systems, <sup>wasn't kept.</sup> lasers and other exotic hardwares. As it turned out, the promise

Once again New York is the cultural point of origin (as it had been with the publication of P. Adams Sitney's "Structural Film" essay (1969), for film in the Beat era) and <sup>its</sup> structural filmmakers became the new orthodoxy, serviced by a new cultural establishment.

The consolidation of the decade began with the opening, in 1970, of the Anthology Film Archives, founded by five men (including Mekas and Sitney), funded by their friend Jerome Hill, and structured to accomodate only the work of their own taste -- even to the extent of the famous "invisible cinema", which made only a certain kind of film look good. <sup>SA</sup> They developed critical power: Mekas continued his persuasive Village Voice columns, he and Sitney continued to publish Film Culture, and <sup>by now</sup> Michelson <sup>as well as</sup> was the film and performance editor of Artforum

editor of film books for Praeger. Both Michelson and Sitney were teaching at New York University, <sup>in their classes,</sup> where <sup>was</sup> the Anthology collection <sup>the standard of</sup> excellence. Sitney's Visionary Film (1974) remains the most scholarly, and therefore Its concluding chapter while more critical towards its subject than the historical chapters, most influential, book on avant-garde cinema. <sup>effectively</sup> canonized its ultimate

the hierarchy of Snow, Sharits, Landow, Frampton and Gehr. NYU-trained students further immortalized the same hierarchy in their critical essays commissioned for the Whitney Museum's History of the American Avant-Garde Cinema catalogue, which was attacked upon its publication in 1976 by Vogel and others precisely for replicating this same

narrow range. Anthology and the NYU Press formalized this partnership with the publication of a series of books, notably Sitney's anthology-on-Anthology, The Essential Cinema (1975), which collected essays on, again, the films in the collection. In the area of exhibition, the chosen filmmakers' fame was spread throughout the U.S. by a new 70's network of Regional Film Centers mandated to devote a portion of <sup>ei</sup>their programming to the New American Cinema. With reputations thus buoyed by publication and exhibition, most of these filmmakers now have secured positions in the numerous filmmaking departments organized in art schools and universities during the 70's. Exhibitions abroad, like Michelson's 1974 Montreux festival <sup>Yvonne</sup>(which widened the spectrum to include <sup>A</sup>Rainer), and acquisitions, like the Pompidou Center's purchase of the entire Anthology collection, have carried this orthodox legacy beyond the U.S. borders. Thus, the brave young challengers whose quest to "ép<sup>u</sup>iter la bourgeoisie" opened the decade have, by its close, become the comfortable establishment, themselves now susceptible to a new challenge. <sup>86</sup>

As the 70's have witnessed the playing out of many of the traditions begun in the 60's, they have also seen the emergence of totally new cinematic movements, particularly in films inspired by the feminist mov<sup>e</sup>ment and minority struggles. Within the established avant garde in the 70's three parallel developments can be seen. One trend is "more of the same": the continuing work of the New American Cinema and structuralist filmmakers essentially along the same lines established in the 60's as well as a generation of younger filmmakers--often their students--following their lead.

A second trend, sometimes originating with the first, is the New Alexandrianism <sup>8C</sup> which exemplifies its self-referential as<sup>i</sup>pect by examining not merely the materiality of film but all the material of the film/art world, with films that end up quoting from other avant-garde films, filmmakers, and critics. There is a consequent upping of the ante in terms of who can understand the work, frequently requiring an intimate knowledge of

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past films in order to catch the quotes. For example, George Landow's WIDE ANGLE SAXON makes a number of witty jokes with punch lines depending on your recognition of some half-dozen major works of avant garde cinema. His later NEW IMPROVED INSTITUTIONAL QUALITY depends both on your knowledge of its namesake and a passing acquaintance with the genre category<sup>2</sup> is in Visionary Film. In Michael Snow's RAMEAU'S NEPHEW a recognition of who the various actors are (the cast includes Michelson, Sitney, and video artist Nam June Paik) and a knowledge of their positions in the art/film world are both necessary for an appreciation of the film's fundamental ironies. In Jim Benning's GRAND OPERA an even greater background is required: the identification of four filmmakers, their pseudonyms and their styles, one filmmaker's voice, and several past works by Benning are all compulsory if the film is to make any sense. These works seem to demand a cadre of professional explainers---sometimes the filmmaker through statements or interviews, but often a generation of younger critics whose program notes, reviews in the art press and essays in Film Culture and Millenium decipher the cinematic heiroglyphics and in-group jokes.

Whereas in the late 50's a general sympathy with bohemian ideals granted an access to avant garde films (via jazz, little magazine literature, life style, etc.), by the late 60's the structuralist films depended on an audience schooled in specific art world concerns. The<sup>v</sup>irtue of this style was its ability to compress and condense theoretical points, wit, etc., to provide an added tension to its narrowing of target. Now, the New Alexandrianism of the late 70's depends on a knowl<sup>1</sup>dge of key avant garde films and celebrities. Thus a trajectory can be traced along a rate of decreasing accessibility, reducing the early avant garde promise of democratization down to a very intimate privileged inner circle.

In a parallel, but not unrelated development, a number of filmmakers have returned to investigating narrative concerns and techniques using trained actors, such sound, recognizable plots, impressive sets. While some of these narrative film<sup>makers</sup> will be discussed by us elsewhere due to overlapping concerns, Mark Rappaport is perhaps the best example of someone wholly--and early on--committed to the New Narrative, with 5 feature films produced during the decade. He represents the high class style of the New Narrative, while the cruder beginnings of the form back in the mid-60's are now being revived by a new generation of post-punk filmmakers based, once again, in New York.

The notion of an avant garde cinema which is both formally and politically radical is basically an idealist position in the United States--a wishful hypothesis rather lacking in illustration, for reasons which should be clear by the end of this article. The few filmmakers committed to this area remain isolated cases, often taken up in Europe where the model has more of a history and constituency, but still an aberration from the political and avant garde mainstreams of the U.S.

The work that fits this model is that of some individuals who

established themselves <sup>first</sup> in traditional avant garde terms before making films with a heavy political influence: Jon Jost, Canadian Joyce Weiland, English emigré Anthony McCall (now working with Andrew Tyndall). Weiland, who worked in New York before returning to Canada (as did Snow), maintains her structuralist origins in *RAT LIFE AND DIET IN NORTH AMERICA* (1968), a comic evocation of Canadian nationalism, while *PIERRE VALLIERES* (1972) presents a single shot, synch sound extreme close up of the Québécois separatist leader's lips giving a militant speech, and *SOLIDARITY* (73) a visual record of a mass labor rally (heard on the sound track) showing only the feet of the demonstrators. Later she turned from avant garde strategies and moved into the traditional feature form for exploring nationalist history through stylized domestic melodrama in *THE FAR SHORE*, (76). Jost, the most Godardian U.S. filmmaker, at his best explores the situations and dilemmas of the counterculture and the left (1,2,3,4 and the autobiographical *SPEAKING DIRECTLY*). Committed to his own version of low budget feature length films, his more recent work has used narrative and reworking of genre conventions.

Anthony McCall has moved from performance and <sup>5</sup>installation art to formalist exploration of the cinematic apparatus with his Cone Series, which, following in the footsteps of *WAVELENGTH* took the ultimate avant garde showcase, Belgium's Knokke festival, by storm in 74-75. More recently, in collaboration with graphic designer Andrew Tyndall, McCall has produced the resolutely didactic *ARGUMENTS* which they see as a "theoretical intervention" into the reigning mindset of the New York art world, but which contradicts, in its effect, its own intentions when it embraces authoritarian intellectual terrorism as an aesthetic strategy.

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Most recently, Yvonne Rainer (who is discussed in the section on feminist work) has completed JOURN<sup>EYS</sup> FROM BERLIN/1971 that offers a new synthesis encompassing autobiography, psychoanalysis, domestic conversation, and a discussion of terrorism, through a variety of formal strategies. In electing to take a stance, i.e., to move beyond the zone of ambiguity, while holding fast to her commitment to and expansion of formal style (including fixed camera, narrative displacements, irony, stream of consciousness progressions, etc.), Rainer has offered an example of how avant garde film could move into a new and potentially fruitful area.

#### The Exceptions that Prove the Rules of the Game: The Token as Breakthrough

One new myth of the seventies is the supposed breakthrough of leftists into the feature documentary, and more recently, fiction category that can win exposure through certain film festivals and can play short runs in art house theatres in select urban areas or college towns. Indeed there is, and has been, a market for one or two feature documentaries each year in the U.S. exhibition pattern. Starting with de Antonio's POINT OF ORDER, IN THE YEAR OF THE PIG, MILLHOUSE, etc. and with Marcel Ophul's THE SORROW AND THE PITY, that space has been opened up for independents and remained open, at the same level, ever since. The documentaries that fill the slot may be of any type--apolitical, like PUMPING IRON, silent in avoiding politics, like GIMME SHELTER, muckraking-exploitative like MARJOE, or dealing with a political subject in a nonpolitical way, like IDI AMIN DADA--but in the 70's they have become a bonus slot for progressive filmmakers with promotional know-how. Sometimes these are self-distributed and self-promoted: Jerry



Bruck's I. F. STONE, Jill Godmillow's ANTONIA, the Mariposa Collective's WORD IS OUT. Occasionally a film can use festival success to transfer at this stage to a major distributor, such as Barbara Kopple's with HARLAN COUNTY, U.S.A., thereby attaining commercial theatre exposure without the personal burden of the talk-show circuit.

More recently there's been a crossover into this terrain by non-documentary filmmakers. The prime example is NORTHERN LIGHTS by Ciné-Manifest's John Hanson and Rob Nillson which employs a kind of revisionist realism in the service of low budget fictional feature narrative. Quite different from the avant garde New Narrative, NORTHERN LIGHTS is out not to break with tradition but to return to it, to a period earlier in Hollywood's history and break back in via a kind of Stanley Kramer socially-conscious movie. Sometimes this attempt fails: a film achieves a certain festival success, but never makes it into the movie theatres, such as the case of Bobby Roth's THE BOSS'S SON (a crossover by a documentarist into fiction) and Victoria Wozniak and David Burton Morris's naturalist LOOSE ENDS, which won a distributor but no increased stature.

The left documentary films aimed at this movie theatre market tend toward Social Democratic politics characterized by a belief in gradual reform, populism, reform within business unionism, anti-monopoly politics and stress on the electoral sphere (that is, in the left wing of the Democratic party), and a silent or very low key approach to questions of racism and sexism. Similarly, the feature films shade off into the older Hollywood tradition of social concern cinema, which goes as far back as GENTLEMAN'S AGREEMENT and as far forward as this year's CHINA SYNDROME.

These films are the exceptions that prove the rule, i.e., that there is very little room for left feature film in commercial exhibition and those admitted reach a small

and class-specific market of already sympathetic liberals, professionals, students, and counterculture alumni. Essentially this is the group which in the U.S. embraced Tanner's JONAH WHO WILL BE 25 IN THE YEAR 2000 because it seemed so close to their own experience, as indeed it is--stressing the most progressive aspects and potentials of petty bourgeois life. Furthermore, the films that this U.S. audience goes to the movie theatre to see are likely to offer, in place of political rhetoric, a new type of rhetorical question. Shouldn't Antonio Brico be allowed to conduct? Wasn't the war in Vietnam horrible? Aren't gays as good as other people? Don't farmer's have the right to their land? The films have a market precisely because they satisfy an already-existing taste and mirror an already-entrenched left-liberal value system.

\*— Even so, the quantity of such films allowed into the movie theatres is limited to one or two a year. The fallacy of the "breakthrough" myth is precisely this: there is always a place for these films, yet despite statements by each year's token filmmakers and their attendant press, there will continue to be one or two such films a year exhibited and talked about, and there cannot be more. A similar phenomenon characterizes the Public Broadcasting System documentary, which uses a parallel route leading from limited festival exposure and nontheatrical success to gain press and open the door to PBS, perhaps boosted by an Academy Award nomination, and finally securing an immortality and riches of sorts through widespread library purchase. Films like UNION MAIDS, MEN'S LIVES, WITH BABIES AND BANNERS exemplify this trend, a pattern which has become increasingly strong since the formation of the Association of Independent Video and Filmmakers and its success in developing a power base and financial backing for its kind of filmmaking. A majority of most white leftist documentaries either fit this pattern or aspire to it.

## Feminist Film and the Women's Movement

Turning from left independent features to feminist filmmaking, we find Claudia Weill's *GIRL FRIENDS* occupying the *NORTHERN LIGHTS* slot: made by a documentarist-turned-fiction director, brought up by a major distributor, winning limited play in art houses and extravagant press coverage. The difference lies in the fact that *NORTHERN LIGHTS* is representative of much mainstream left filmmaking, whereas *GIRL FRIENDS* is an anomaly in the world of feminist cinema. Feminist filmmaking moves in a different direction because, in contrast to most of the previous films and categories we have discussed, it directly addresses a very diverse but clearly defined audience. There's something different in its relationship to market and audience, something which seeks a return to the direct connection with women's movement principles and issues without sacrificing an attention to formal experimentation. Feminist filmmaking, for the first time, makes possible an avant garde practice that relates to an audience beyond the usual self-reflecting art world, an audience tapped by the films' most basic subject matter and yet receptive to their artistic strategies. Furthermore, with feminist filmmaking emerging out of the New Left, as it did in the U.S., it has made possible for the first time a documentary practice that does not efface the personal. The "personal is political" dictum of the women's movement has led feminist filmmakers to profoundly rethink not only their subject matter, but also their processes and their relationship to the audience. This has brought feminist filmmakers into a much closer relationship both with the people and activities depicted in their films and with their audience.

With many feminist films coming out of specific existing traditions (documentary, avant garde, educational) increasingly a unified affinity can be defined that has to do with feminism itself, rather than with loyalty to a specific filmic discipline. Its link to an

alive and evolving political movement gives this cinema its great strength. For example, the women's movement has built a number of structures: women's film festivals, publications, women's studies classes, women's music festivals and galleries, concerts, publishing and record making projects, coffeehouses, bookstores, etc. These alternative institutions have made it possible for even very radical work to reach a wide and sympathetic audience of women in addition to, or in place of, the standard outlets formerly available. The presence of these alternatives has likewise fostered a word-of-mouth network that has proven very useful for feminist filmmakers facing the distribution effort <sup>2</sup> always so fraught with impossible finance under capitalism. This alternative film/audience relationship had had two effects.

First, the new structures provide a new context within which the film is viewed, both physically (in different spaces) and aesthetically (within new frameworks of thought and experience). Whatever the original focus or intention, these feminist films of value can be "recontextualized." Often in the past this has been a technique used by the dominant culture to co-opt subcultures, but one which now can work more productively in the other direction. Marjorie Keller's MISCONCEPTION, an avant garde film about childbirth, is a good example. Keller's use of super-8, hand-held camera work, rapid editing that often cuts on color and texture, focus on domestic life, and theme of childbirth, all led to an artworld appreciation of the film in terms of Brakhage's own earlier work, WINDOW WATER BABY MOVING. This heritage obscured two essential points. First, the problematic male perspective of the Brakhage film, which led Maya Deren to storm out of one of the original screenings in 1959,<sup>9</sup> complaining about Brakhage's invasion of women's private space; and second, the ways in which Keller's film is not a "female Brakhage film" at all but fundamentally different with her addition of synch sound, a tape spliced print blown up to 16mm for distribution, critique of child-birth methodology, camera style that opens to

examination the role of both mother and father in the event transpiring, the power and personal relations involved, and even the overt polemic of the title. In the avant garde circles within which Keller screens her film, the Brakhage comparison is likely to be invoked in order to fault this interloper. However, the film's increasing access to feminist audiences has made possible a radical recontextualizing of Keller's project: an appreciation for her complex handling of a fundamental feminist issue, i.e., the relation of men and women to "motherhood as experience and institution" in the words of Adrienne Rich's feminist analysis in Of Woman Born.

Such a recontextualizing alters the terms within which a film can be located, leading to the second effect brought about by the existence of an alternative feminist audience: the boundary weakness of traditional categories. The removal of removal of traditional loyalties to professional or disciplinary territory in favor of an overriding feminist allegiance provides this "weakness" at the level of the film's production. But the further opening up of audience--what we have termed recontextualizing--has led to an even more radical alteration of categories at the level of reception. The early 70's women's film festivals produced the phenomenon of recontextualising an entire body of work, ranging from the claims made for Dorothy Arzner as a feminist auteur, to the recognition of Maya Deren as founding mother, to the annexation of such essentially structuralist filmmakers as Weiland or Anne Severson to a feminist aesthetic. Articles on Yvonne Rainer in feminist journals have aided in the recontextualization of her work (already acclaimed in art circles familiar with her dance and performance background) within the feminist community, where her films had remained unknown despite their likely acceptance for her ironic examination of the positioning of women within heterosexuality, within the cinema, and in the sphere of culture in general. Thus, the rigor of preordained categories softens upon the entry

of a film into the exhibition/reception process, where the audience can effect profound changes in a film's assumed aesthetic force, emotional impact, or political meaning. Provisional and wavering though they may be, certain broad categories can describe the body of feminist cinema: documentary, avant-garde, fictional narrative, and a new genre with less clearcut antecedents.

Within the documentary sector, two different tendencies are apparent. One, exemplified by New Day films, the feminist distribution cooperative handling largely mainstream format documentaries has its emphasis on the educational documentary and often seems directed toward an existing market structure (schools, libraries, mainstream social service institutions, and PBS). Though progressive for making visible the lives of women previously expunged from the screen (such as UNION MAIDS' rewriting of women into labor history), the New Day films are limited in a dual way by their choice of vehicle and their liberal reformist politics. On a formal level, they simply insert women into a male-defined formula, such as the standard television profile style of THE FLASHETTES which shows a black adolescent women's track team. Looking the same, such films are immediately cooptable into the dominant ideology: same package, same effect. On a political level, their failure to define any politics of feminism had led to such a contradictory work as MEN'S LIVES, which discusses men's socialization without ever mentioning the existence of a feminist movement or the feminist analysis of sexism, resulting in a film easily absorbed into liberal humanism in the service of corporate capitalism and beyond: the film is used in the Armed Forces. New Day films tend to read the political as merely the personal, producing films which inevitably offer up the vision of a privatized individual. Since the larger world and a clear and open political analysis is not contained in the films, by and large, it depends upon an informed discussion leader, teacher, or audience for



articulation. Though the New Day films have been an important resource for many women, they remain severely (and unnecessarily) limited in both political and aesthetic grounds.

Another approach to documentary has been the consciousness-raising (CR) model (as elucidated by Julia Lesage)<sup>10</sup> developed to replace the cinema verité model formerly prevalent. In a film like SELF-HEALTH, where much of the material of women's health-care processes comes itself from a CR environment, the film replicates and communicates this CR sense in its positioning of the women portrayed, inclusion of conversational banter, and generally warm intimate tone. In a film like WE'RE ALIVE, where the location within a women's prison obviously precludes such an approach, the elements of CR are nevertheless still visible in the group structure, the emphasis on interactive conversation, and the opening/closing sections which specifically link these individual women to the larger struggle. Both on the level of intention and representation, the CR-modeled documentaries change the relation of people within the film to the camera and filmmaker at the time of production as well as the relation of the audience to the film itself at the time of screening. Not all feminist documentaries, of course, fit these two models. For example, THE CHICAGO MATERNITY CENTER STORY (made by the Kartemquin Collective) mixes aspects of both the CR-model and the openly didactic approach to make its own analysis of the health-care industry under capitalism clear to its audience.

Equally of interest are the directions taken by women working within avant garde traditions, both in California and New York. The West Coast work has often remained in a close relationship to the earlier independent film tradition of California Zen Individualism even though the content is much different. Freude Bartlett and Gunvor Nelson are two of the better known of this group. Among others, Barbara Hammer's goddess mystique takes the place of James Broughton's genteel male eroticism, just as the West Coast films

substitute the material of women's culture and women's <sup>↑</sup>bodyies (menstruation, female ritual, lesbianism) for the previous standard material. Hammer, Barbara Linkevitch, and Conni Beeson are all making films within this category. Their films have direct links to the development of "women's culture," and a variously embody such themes as female separatism, lesbianism, idealism, stress on subjectivity and the unconscious, anti-intellectualism, and the romanticisation of nature over technology. These films are often an important catalyst in forcing a coming to terms with the depiction of women's sexuality and subcultural experience on the screen. By breaking taboos of sexuality and the body, they recover the early progressive tradition of the New American cinema in exposing the fraudulence of bourgeois sexuality without falling into the trap of a sexist exploitation, yet they are still limited by buying into an essentialist notion of sexuality that ignores ideology.

A different sector can be defined as the work of avant garde women filmmakers who have a feminist sensibility. They are often working with new and innovative experimental forms trying to find new ways of saying things, of expressing feminist concerns and issues. They are often specifically concerned with questions of the representation of women in their films. The work of Marjorie Keller has already been mentioned. The leading figure in this areas is undoubtedly Yvonne Rainer. Her film FILM ABOUT A WOMAN WHO... manages to include both the casual oppressions of heterosexuality in daily life and the emotional blackmail of women in the public sphere (as in the uproar over the Angela Davis-George Jackson correspondence). Most crucially, it was Rainer who first introduced emotion and the human figure back into avant-garde film in the Seventies. She ~~has~~ consistently confronted the dilemma of representing women without exploitation in her work. Also

discuss  
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FUSES

Janis Crystal Lipzin, Bette Gordon, <sup>and</sup> Martha Haslanger belongs to this direction which itself contains some echoes of previous categories, such as the New Alexandrianism of Carel Rowe's GRAND DELUSION which plays with references to recent film theory.

#### Experimental Feminist Political Films

A different group of feminist experimental films has no clear antecedent tradition. In fact, diversity and eclecticism is part of its operation, and in this it shares closer links with the more politicized parts of the feminist literary and art world (represented by publications like Heresies, Chrysalis, Conditions) and the more culturally open-minded parts of the politically active feminist movement (represented by the news and analysis publications Off Our Backs and Lesbian Tide).than with the male dominated experimental film world.

This group of films has a number of characteristics that make it a promising development for all political filmmaking in the U.S. First, the films deal openly with issues of importance to the women's movement (such as rape, mother-daughter relations, lesbian values, homophobia), taking a stand aimed at furthering the ongoing analysis and level of discussion, not only in the screening space, but in the personal lives and political work of the audience. For example, JoAnn Elam's RAPE uses video to provide access to the medium for the women presented (themselves rape victims now involved in rape crisis work), participating in a CR-style discussion of rape. Then she utilizes her own cinematic techniques (street footage, intertitles, symbolic games) to elucidate the discussion points and amplify the women's testimony into a broader analysis. Used in women's studies classes, and in educational and political work around issues of rape, the film's clearcut political position allows a further development of consciousness in its audience, while the open-ended format encourages the audience to take up its half of the dialogue.

Another characteristic of these experimental feminist political films is their willingness to utilize

emotion as a basic element of film structure and audience connection. Left filmmaking frequently errs either in the direction of stridency (striking the repetitive beat of outrage), or of overemphasising the rational, leading to a reliance on logic, a tendency toward dry didacticism, and sometimes even an authoritarian narrator. Feminist documentaries have tended to fall into a different trap, producing a moment of thrill, reverence or pathos that wrapped up the filmic experience before the audience left the theatre. These newer films use emotion, particularly anger and humor, in a different way--to activate the audience and disrupt complacency. The attraction of humor is its ability to subvert cinematic structures in a way that is more democratizing than the previous avant-garde strategy of deconstruction and distanciation, which shut the audience out of the film instead of opening the film up to the audience. Jan Oxenberg's *A COMEDY IN SIX UNNATURAL ACTS* for example, uses humor to deflate the power of the heterosexual codes governing social customs and cinematic representation. Her affectionate satire of lesbian role-playing provides a mode of analysis that pokes fun simultaneously at <sup>some of</sup> the ludicrous aspects of the lesbian feminist movement and the even more ridiculous mores of the dominant culture. Thus the film conveys a double message: for lesbians, its a championing of self without glossing over faults; for the general audience, its a biting critique of homophobia.

Another feature of this category is the willingness to mix existing cinematic forms (as do both Oxenberg and Elam) in an effort to discover a synthesis better suited to the needs of feminist cinema. There's a willingness to mix modes (fiction, documentary, experimental, animation, home movies, etc.) and experiment with new ways of organizing material. This new formal synthesis fits the need of feminist cinema to find an aesthetic connection linking the personal and political, the specific and the general, the concrete and abstract, the practical and theoretical, private and social, and the psyche and history. Such an artistic connection complements the political analysis and practical action of the feminist movement. For example, Michelle Citron's *DAUGHTER RITE* examines relations between women within the family by juxtaposing acted sequences which replicate cinema-verite documentary style, actual home movie footage rephotographed

to uncover the meaning of gesture as female socialization, and first-person journal entries that show the gradual evolution of a filmmaker's relation to her own mother. By mixing forms, Citron's film challenges the authority of established forms, and critiques the ideology implicit in their manner of representation (i.e., the cinema "truth" of cinema verite).

Feminist experimental political films exhibit several other characteristic elements which must be considered together with the above-mentioned traits. The films are all accessible to a large and diverse audience precisely because of their commitment to real issues, emotional response, and innovative presentation. Where they are weak is where large parts of the feminist movement are weak--in developing an analysis of the causes of the oppression they so forcefully protest and in dealing with issues of class and race (the differences within sisterhood).

We believe these weaknesses reflect the actual historical situation of the American women's movement today, but we also see many feminists increasingly aware<sup>of</sup> these issues. Because these feminist filmmakers see themselves not as alienated outcasts from society<sup>nor</sup> as oracles, but as part of a feminist community, their films are able to connect with the experiences of the audience and communicate in a non-hierarchical manner. The films reflect a new recognition of the artist's social role--specialist, to be sure, but more importantly engaged participant in a changing movement.

#### NATIONAL MINORITY FILMMAKING

The position of women as a "vertical class"--distributed evenly within classes, and oppressed in many similar ways across classes--has meant that the rise of feminism gave some women a nearly immediate access to the modes of production and financial resources, an access which puts these women, and especially those in media, in a privileged position vis-à-vis minority groups seeking control of their own cinematic representation. (Although it should be clear that women filmmakers are still materially oppressed compared with--and all too often, directly by--their male counterparts.) Blacks, Hispanics, Asian and Native people are not evenly distributed across class lines--most are in the working class and strata of permanent poor. It is

for this reason that we find feminist cinema already in such a developed state in comparison with Black and other minority filmmaking, even though the civil rights and black power phases of the Black movement preceded the emergence of feminism as a large scale force. There is an established tradition and audience for the combination of sharp radical political perspective (often heavily nationalist or Pan-Africanist) and innovative form in other Black arts—particularly music, literature, theatre, and applied arts. The long heritage of radical Black art is a resource and inspiration for all radical political filmmaking. Unfortunately, autonomous Black filmmaking, after an independence in the 1920's and 30's, was crushed by and absorbed into mainstream white Hollywood film. As a result, with the route of apprenticeship in an independent sphere gone, and with formal film study until very recently the almost exclusive terrain of expensive private schools (NYU, USC, Columbia, Temple, Northwestern, etc.) and <sup>prestige</sup> state universities (UCLA, Texas, Pennsylvania) very few Black, Hispanic, or asian filmmakers have had access to the training and facilities to make films. Because the movements for national minority liberation constantly and consistently must deal with oppression and exploitation, it is to minority cinemas that we have to look for a strong race and class analysis that positions the individual in clear social and political struggle, for these issues are the most urgent, most inescapable, in militant minority filmmaking.

Black independent filmmaking on any scale is largely a development of the Seventies with the gains of civil rights and the Black power movements of the Sixties having enough limited impact to allow acquisition of skills and access, however limited, to resources and funds. Increased opportunities and steadily increasing political consciousness have led to new films and organizations. An important figure in this regard is St. Clair Bourne (director of LET THE CHURCH SAY AMEN), founder and editor of Chamba Notes which has been a key informational and political forum for issues of black filmmaking in the U.S., spanning a broad spectrum from independent militant films



to black individuals working in the industry to reports on African cinema.

Haile Gerima, a native Ethiopian schooled in the U.S. and now a professor at Howard University, has developed an inventive and sophisticated mode of filmmaking that blends surrealism, cinema verite, and a fictional narrative structure. His *BUSH MAMA* is a powerful indictment of the welfare system's treatment of the black women in its grasp, while at the same time offering a sympathetic and rich portrayal of interpersonal relations among ghetto women. Larry Clark has made *PASSING THROUGH*, a fiction film in a more Hollywood-inflected style about the life of jazz musicians. Though less radical than Gerima's film in its critique of the infrastructure of racist capitalism, *PASSING THROUGH* does present an inventive use of mock-documentary footage that works to appropriate "real" black history into the character of its individual black hero. More recently, Warrington Hudlin has sought to come to terms with black street culture in his *STREET CORNER STORIES*, a documentary view of the oral tradition maintained by the ghetto's street-corner dudes--a film that marks an important step in blacks winning over the documentation and interpretation of their own culture from the "ethnographic" filmmakers who have been all too content to maintain them as only an object of study. *A DREAM IS WHAT YOU WAKE UP FROM*, just completed by Third World Newsreel, advances a new analytic and formally inventive style, mixing actors with real-life situations, to examine the nature of the Black family. Black filmmakers are clearly confronting issues of formal and political strategy shaped by different forces than feminist film. They know and use Third World cinema, with its emphasis on native culture serving political goals, yet still must confront the racism, blaxploitation, and exploitation of the image shaped for them by Hollywood. They tend to be particularly clear about the audience for their work--primarily their own people--and have, through this commitment, escaped many of the pitfalls other radical filmmakers have stumbled in when faced with the compromise between

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serving the needs of a particular audience and the need to publicize that particular audience to a different, general public. Larry Clark, for example, makes no effort to identify the black revolutionary heroes at the close of *PASSING THROUGH*. If we do not know who these major figures are, well, that's our problem, and a powerful political lesson to swallow. Haile Gerima felt no compunction to have his true-to-life characters in *BUSH MAMA* clean up their act, or display model behavior, to win over any racist whites in the potential audience to the cause of the model black citizen. No mentality of being "on probation" in the white world leads these filmmakers down the path of homogenizing their identity. That's an important example for other radical filmmakers to absorb as well.

In the latter half of the decade, a progressive Chicano and Puerto Rican cinema has begun to <sup>emerge</sup>

For example, the Chicano Film Festival (a national festival based in Texas) has just marked its fifth year and in celebration is circulating a showcase of Chicano films around the country. This will undoubtedly have an enormous impact on the recognition of this tradition. Access to resources, so far limited, is expanding. Jesus Treviño made his feature film, *RAICES DE SANGRE*, with production monies from the Mexican Film Bank during its brief progressive period. More recently, Sylvia Morales has produced *CHICANA*, based on what was originally a slide show, and now the first documentary uncovering historic roots of women in Aztec tradition, the role of women in the Mexican revolution, their representation in Mexican-American art, and their part in the Chicano movement today. In the pages of the Chicano Cinema Newsletter articles have already begun confronting the direction of Chicano cinema and the question of a Chicano film aesthetic.

Puerto Rican film work is, so far, more visible on the regional than the national level. In Chicago, for example, the Cinta Boricua group has been teaching film in a community workshop

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situation, resulting in UNO MAS, a humorously effective short film on the realities of immigrant life in Chicago which uses music and Spanish language voice-over to emphasize its visual points. One East Coast Puerto Rican filmmaker, Julio Torres-Sota, is developing an intriguing approach to humor as a social barometer, both through simple animation and through a modified photovoyeurism form: his ATRAPPADA is a surrealist television soap opera with a social conscience.

#### Closing the Decade, Opening the Future

It is clear to us that the leading role (literally, the avant garde) in unifying political struggles with innovative film work at this point is taken by filmmakers formed in the 70's in the decade's political struggles. The situation is much more contradictory and fluid than in the 50's when a common rejection of Eisenhower America could unite bohemian artists and political militants in the early New American Cinema. And it differs too from the flowering of protest in the 60's when sexual liberalization merged with civil rights, when pacifism and anti-imperialism shared a common cause, when the counterculture saw its efforts as parallel and supportive of Black Power. The 70's showed a new development with coalition politics, limited issues and local work stressed as radicals had to rethink the connections between racism, sexism, and class oppression. The Alternative Cinema Conference in the summer of 1979 did not provide answers for filmmakers, but it did demonstrate that new forces were emerging and beginning to make connections. These new conditions open new possibilities for uniting avant garde filmmaking and radical political activity.

Notes

1. For a full account of the Alternative Cinema Conference see the articles and documents in Jump Cut nos. 21 and 22 (the latter forthcoming).
2. We have developed discussions of our premises and values elsewhere: Rich, "The P Crisis of Naming in Feminist Film Criticism," Jump Cut 19, and Kleinhans, "Reading and Thinking about the Avant Garde," Jump Cut 6.
3. Amos Vogel, *Film as a Subversive Art*, p. 323.
4. Parker Tyler, *Underground Film: A Critical History* pp. 33-34.
- 4A. Jonas Mekas, "Where are We--The Underground?" in Gregory Battcock, *The New American Cinema*, p. 20.
5. Jonas Mekas, "The Experimental Film in America," in P. Adams Sitney, ed., *Film Culture Reader*, pp. 22-23.
6. Jonas Mekas, "FLAMING CREATURES at Knokke-Le Soute," in Mekas, *Movie Journal*, p. 115.
7. Annette Michelson, "Film and the Radical Aspiration," in Battcock, p. 83.
8. *Ibid*, p. 101
- 8A. As Ellen Freyer described the Invisible Cinema ("Formalist Cinema: Artistic Suicide in the Avant-Garde" *The Velvet Light Trap*, no. 13, Fall 1974):

If the name (Anthology Film Archives) doesn't express clearly enough the ossification, sterilization and self-glorification of the so-called "avant garde" one need only enter the theatre. A select group of films, decided upon by a select group of Board Members, are shown each evening on a continual rotating basis. They (sic) cycle of films is repeated approximately every three months. It is a consistent expression of the same process of repetition that we have already observed in the films themselves. Total silence is requested in the total blackness of this "invisible" theatre, so named by

by its designer, Peter Kubelka, one of the early "formalist" filmmakers. Not only is the theatre invisible, but other viewers are too. The sides of each seat are high enough to block vision of persons seated on either side or in front, thus repeating the themes of isolation and the elimination of human contact we have also seen in the films themselves. One comes to worship in this Temple of Art, attended only by other devotees. Revered with all the sanctimoniousness of a High Mass, the entire experience glorifies the alienation of both filmmaker and film viewer.

Most obviously, comic and militant films could only fall flat in such an atmosphere.

8B. We are not including here a discussion of the diverse exhibition spaces established during this period in New York: Millenium, Film Forum, the Whitney programming (in contrast to the Whitney History) and the ongoing Cineprobe series at the MOMA. Nor are we doing justice to West Coast and other regional alternative exhibition. These subjects deserve fresh studies. Our concern is more limited: to trace the exceptional consolidation of power in the Anthology--Film Culture--Artforum axis of the early 70's.

8C. New Alexandrianism. After the great period of Athenian literature and philosophy, the Greek writers of Alexandria (which had its "Golden Age" circa 280 BC--circa 240 BC) were known for rejecting traditional and popular forms in favor of rare and minor ones, for learned and obscure writing, and for a criticism which was scholastic and concerned with establishing a canon of earlier work. Similarly, the New Alexandrian tendency in current U.S. film is concerned with making films filled with obscure (and often witty) allusions to previous avant garde film work and personalities. Such films are clearly made for a small coterie who can understand the allusions, and often the films demand elaborate critical notes for the uninitiated. In this they resemble some 20th century writers who have been called "Alexandrian": T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, James Joyce.

9. reported in Tyler, p. 37.

10. Julia Lesage, "The Political Aesthetics of the Feminist Documentary Film," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies*, 3:4 (Fall, 1978), 507-524.